



SATURDAY ..... Sept. 15, 1917

## BIG TIMBER

(Continued from Page Three.)

was packed with the silver herds, thrashing through shoal and rapid to reach the spawning ground before they died. Off every creek mouth and all along the lake the seal followed to prey on the salmon, and sea trout and lakies alike swarmed to the spawning beds to feed upon the roe. The days shortened. Sometimes a fine rain would drizzle for hours on end, and when it would clear the saw toothed ranges flanking the lake would stand out all freshly roiled in white—a mantle that crept lower on the fir clad slopes after each storm.

Early in October Charlie Benton had quacked his neighborly account with Jack Fyfe. With crew and equipment he moved home, to begin work anew on his own time.

Katy John and her people came back from the salmon fishing. Then Charlie wheedled Stella into taking up the cook-house burden again. Stella consented. In truth she could do nothing else. Charlie spent a little of his contract profits in piping water to the kitchen, in a few things to brighten up and make more comfortable their own quarters.

"Just as soon as I can put another boom over the rapids, Stell," he promised, "I'll put a cook on the job. I've got to sail a little closer for awhile. With this crew I ought to put a million feet in the water in six weeks. Then I'll be over the hump, and you can take it easy. But till then—"

"Well, why not?" Benton demanded impatiently. "Nobody around here works any harder than I do."

And there the matter rested.

CHAPTER VI.  
One Way Out.

THAT was a winter of big snow. November opened with rain. Day after day the sun hid his face behind massed, spitting clouds. Morning, noon and night the eaves of the shacks dripped steadily, the gaunt limbs of hardwoods were a line of scouring drops, and through all the vast reaches of fir and cedar the patter of rain kept up a dreary monotone. Whenever the mist that blew like rolling smoke along the mountains lifted for a brief hour there, creeping steadily downward, lay the banked white.

Before the snow put a stop to logging, Jack Fyfe dropped in once a week or so. When work shut down he came oftener, but he never singled Stella out for any particular attention. Once he surprised her sitting with her elbows on the kitchen table, her face buried in her palms. She looked up at his quiet entrance, and her face must have given him his cue. He leaned a little toward her.

"How long do you think you can stand it?" he asked gently.

"God knows," she answered, surprised into speaking the thought that lay uppermost in her mind, surprised beyond measure that he should read that thought.

He stood looking down at her for a second or two. His lips parted, but he closed them again over whatever rose to his tongue and passed silently through the dining room and into the bunkhouse, where Benton had preceded him a matter of ten minutes.

It lacked a week of Christmas. That day three of Benton's men had gone in the Chickamin to Roring Springs for supplies. They had returned in mid-afternoon, and Stella guessed by the new note of hilarity in the bunkhouse that part of the supplies had been liquid. This had happened more than once since the big snow closed in. She remembered Charlie's fury at the logger who started Matt the cook on his spree, and she wondered at this relaxation, but it was not in her province, and she made no comment.

Jack Fyfe stayed to supper that evening. Neither he nor Charlie came back to Benton's quarters when the meal was finished. While she stacked up the dishes Katy John observed:

"Goodness sakes, Miss Benton, them fellers was fresh at supper. They was half drunk, some of them. I bet they'll be half a dozen fights before mornin'."

Later there rose a brief clamor. In the dead silence that followed she heard a thud and the clinking smash of breaking glass, a panted oath, sounds of struggle.

Stella slipped on a pair of her brother's gum boots and an overcoat and ran out on the path beaten from their cabin to the shore. It led past the bunkhouse, and on that side opened two uncurtained windows, yellow squares that struck gleaming on the snow. The panes of one were broken now, sharp fragments standing like saw teeth in the wooden sash.

She stole warily near and looked in. Two men were being held apart, one by three of his fellows, the other by Jack Fyfe alone. Fyfe grinned mildly, talking to the men in a quiet, pacific tone.

"Now you know that was nothing to scrap about," she heard him say. "You're both full of fighting whiskey, but a bunkhouse isn't any place to fight. Wait till morning. If you've still got it in your systems go outside and have it out. But you shouldn't disturb our game and break up the furniture. Be gentlemen, drunk or sober. Better shake hands and call it square."

"Aw, let 'em go to it, if they want to."

Charlie's voice, drink thickened,



"Now you know that was nothing to scrap about," she heard him say,

Farsh, came from a corner of the room into which she could not see until she moved nearer. By the time she picked him out Fyfe resumed his seat at the table where three others and Benton waited with cards in their hands, red and white chips and money stacked before them.

She knew enough of cards to realize that a stiff poker game was on the board when she had watched one hand dealt and played. It angered her, not from any ethical motive, but because of her brother's part in it. He had no funds to pay a cook's wages, yet he could afford to lose on one hand as much as he credited her with for a month's work. She could slave at the kitchen job day in and day out to save him \$45 a month. He could lose that without the flicker of an eyelash, but he couldn't pay her wages on demand. Also she saw that he had imbibed too freely. If the redness of his face and the glassy fixedness of his eyes could be read aright,

"Dig!" she muttered. "If that's his idea of pleasure. Oh, well, why should I care? I don't, so far as he's concerned, if I could just get away from this beast of a place myself."

Abreast of her a logger came to the broken window with a sack to bar out the frosty air. And Stella, realizing suddenly that she was shivering with the cold, ran back to the cabin and got into her bed.

But she did not sleep, save in uneasy periods of dozing, until midnight was long past. Then Fyfe and her brother came in, and by the sounds she gathered that Fyfe was putting Charlie to bed. She heard his deep, drawling voice urging the unwisdom of sleeping with caked boots on and Benton's hiccup response. The rest of the night she slept fitfully, morbidly imagining terrible things. She was afraid, that was the sum and substance of it. Over in the bunkhouse the carousal was still



Jack Fyfe Sat With His Feet on the Oven Door.

at its height. She could not rid herself of the sight of those two men struggling to be at each other like wild beasts, the bloody face of the one who had been struck, the coarse animalism of the whole whisky saturated gang. It repelled and disgusted and frightened her.

The night frosts had crept through the single board walls of Stella's room and made its temperature akin to outdoors when the alarm awakened her at 6 in the morning. She shivered as she dressed. Katy John was blissfully devoid of any responsibility, for seldom did Katy rise first to light the kitchen fire. Yet Stella resented less each day's bleak beginning than she did the enforced necessity of the situation. The fact that she was enduring these things practically under compulsion was what galled.

A cutting wind struck her icily as she crossed the few steps of open between cabin and kitchen. Above no cloud floated, no harbinger of melting rain. The cold stars twinkled over snow blurred forest, struck tiny gleams from stumps that were now white capped pillars. A night swell from the outside waters beat its melancholy dirge on the frozen beach. And, as she always did at that hushed hour before dawn, she experienced a physical shrinking from those grim solitudes in which there was nothing warm and human and kindly, nothing but vastness of space upon which silence lay like a smothering blanket, in which she, the human atom, was utterly negligible, a protesting mote in the inexorable wilderness.

A light burned in the kitchen. She thanked her stars that this bitter cold morning she would not have to build a fire with freezing fingers while her teeth chattered, and she hurried in to the warmth heralded by a spark belching stovepipe. But the Slawash girl had not risen to the occasion. Instead Jack Fyfe sat with his feet on the oven door, a cigar in one corner of his mouth. The kettle steamed. Her porridge not boiled ready for the meal.

"Good morning," he greeted. "Mind my pre-empting your job?"

"Not at all," she answered. "You can have it for keeps if you want."

"Aren't you getting pretty sick of this sort of work, these more or less uncomfortable surroundings and the sort of people you have to come in contact with?" he asked pointedly.

"I am," she returned as bluntly, "but I think that's rather an impertinent question, Mr. Fyfe."

"You hate it," he said positively. "I know you do. I've seen your feelings many a time. I don't blame you. It's a rotten business with a girl of your tastes and biding up. And I'm afraid you'll find it worse if this snow stays long. I know what a logging camp is when work stops and whisky creeps in and the boss lets go his hold."

"That may be true," she returned gloomily, "but I don't see why you should enumerate these disagreeable things for my benefit."

"I'm going to show you a way out," he said softly. "I've been thinking it over for quite awhile. I want you to marry me."

Stella gasped.

"Mr. Fyfe?"

"Listen," he said peremptorily, leaning closer to her and lowering his voice. "I have an idea that you're going to say you don't love me. Lord, I know that. But you hate this. It grates against every inclination of yours like a file on steel. I wouldn't far on you like that; wouldn't permit you to live in surroundings that would. That's the material side of it. Nobody can live on day dreams. I like you, Stella Benton, a whole lot more than I'd care to say right out loud. You and I together could make a home we'd be proud of. I want you, and you want to get away from this. It's natural. Marry me and play the game fair and I don't think you'll be sorry. I'm putting it as baldly as I can. You stand to win everything with nothing to lose but your domestic chains." The gleam of a smile lit up his features for a second. "Won't you take a chance?"

"No," she declared impulsively. "I won't be a party to any such cold blooded transaction."

"You don't seem to understand me," he said soberly. "I don't want to hand out any sentiment, but it makes me sore to see you wasting yourself on this sort of thing. If you must do it, why don't you do it for somebody who'll make it worth while? Because we don't marry with our heads in the fog is not reason we shouldn't get on fine. What are you going to do—stick here at this till you go crazy? You won't get away. You don't realize what a one idea, determined person this brother of yours is. He has just one object in life, and he'll use everything and everybody in sight to attain that object. He means to succeed, and he will. You're purely incidental. But he has that perverted, middle class family pride that will make him prevent you from getting out and trying your own wings. Nature never intended a woman like you to be a cellmate, any more than I was so intended. And sooner or late you'll marry somebody if only to hop out of the fire into the frying pan."

"I hate you," she flashed passionately, "when you talk like that."

"No, you don't," he returned quietly. "You hate what I say because it's the truth, and it's humiliating to be helpless. You think I don't sabe? But I'm putting a weapon into your hand. Let's put it differently; leave out the sentiment for a minute. We'll say that I want a housekeeper, preferably an ornamental one, because I like beautiful things. You want to get away from this drudgery. That's what it is, simple drudgery. You crave lots of things you can't get by yourself, but that you could help me get for you. There's things lacking in your life, and so are there in mine. Why shouldn't we go partners? You think about it."

"I don't need to," she answered coolly. "It wouldn't work. You don't appear to have any idea what it means for a woman to give herself up body and soul to a man she doesn't care for. For me it would be plain selling myself. I haven't the least affection for you. I might even detest you."

"You wouldn't," he said positively.

"What makes you so sure of that?" she demanded.

"It would sound conceited if I told you why," he drawled. "Listen. We're not gods and goddesses, we human beings. We're not, after all, in our real impulses, so much different from the age when a man took his club and went after a female that looked good to him. They mated and raised their young and very likely faced on an average fewer problems than arise in modern marriages supposedly ordained in heaven. You'd have the one big problem solved—the lack of means to live decently, which wrecks more homes than anything else, far more than lack of love. Affection doesn't thrive on poverty. What is love?"

His voice took on a challenging note. "I don't know," she answered absently, turning over strips of bacon with the long handled fork.

"There you are," he said. "I don't know, either. We'd start even, then, for the sake of argument. No, I guess we wouldn't, either, because you're the only woman I've run across so far with whom I could calmly contemplate spending the rest of my life in close contact. That's a fact. To me it's a highly important fact. You don't happen to have any such feeling about me, eh?"

"No. I hadn't even thought of you in that way," Stella answered truthfully.

"You want to think about me," he said calmly. "You want to think about me from every possible angle, because I'm going to come back and ask you this same question every once in awhile so long as you're in reach and doing this dirty work for a thankless boss. You want to think of me as a possible refuge from a lot of disagreeable things. I'd like to have you to chum with, and I'd like to have come incentive to put a big white bungalow on that old foundation for us two," he smiled. "I'll never do it for myself alone. Go on. Take a gambling chance and marry me, Stella. Say yes, and say it now."

But she shook her head resolutely.

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